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The Ichi Tradition: *A Symbol of Identity and Nobility Among the Igbo*

By Chizobem Chinedu Opiah

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FEATURE
IMAGE

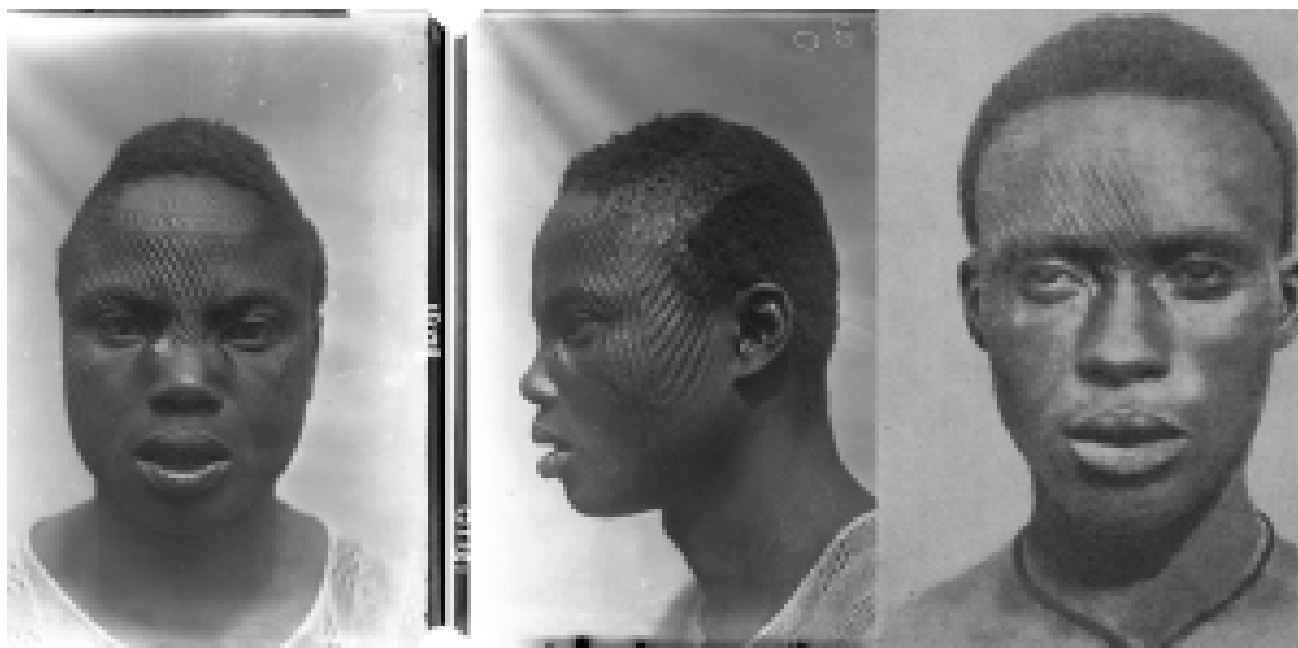
**An Igbo Mgburuichi from Nri.
Photographed by Northcote Thomas,
c. 1910-1911. Museum of
Archaeology and Anthropology,
Cambridge**

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Igbo Men with Mgburuichi from Nri. Photographed by Northcote Thomas, c. 1910-1911. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge

Before the incursion of Christian missionary activity into Igbo society, this ichi marking was an important protective mechanism for its bearers against the convoluted social fabrics in Igbo society. Those with distinctive facial scars were partly immune from the dread horror of abduction for slavery, which loomed large during those turbulent times. Among the Igbo, ichi was more than a kind of aesthetic; rather, it was a cultural emblem of status and prestige, actually, in many communities, one precondition for the well-respected ozotitle.

Ichi marks acted as a testimony to class stratification, in which the act of receiving the mark was not only a rite of passage but also mirrored

the social-economic status of the individual. In this tradition, the fact that a person could afford to hire the expensive instruments involved in the marking was a surety of his or her wealth. There existed two types of ichi knives: one was kept for the rich, which would bear a higher charge against its use, and the other for lowly commoners. The Nwadioka, the practitioners of ichi cutting, would remit a part of their earnings to a group of retired practitioners known as the Ndi Isimmanka, to show that there are communal aspects even to this very ancient tradition.

An Igbo man with facial marks of nobility known as ichi in G. T. Basden's *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (London: Seeley, Service & Co., 1921), 184.

However, by the mid-twentieth century, the spread of Christianity had made an impact on the practice of ichi marking. Missionaries condemned the practice as fetishistic, and it therefore declined considerably. However, this tradition was revived in Neni in 1978. The scars became symbolic and are now performed every year at the Nka Dioka Cultural Festival. I was witness to this revived tradition during its 40th-anniversary celebration on 31st December 2018. In 1992, two

men were ritually carried on the backs of attendants, laid on mats, and the ichi marks outlined on their foreheads with the chanting of traditional ichi songs and a ceremonial presentation of fish in a partial reenactment of the original act, but this time around without leaving a scarring trace of an inch.

The ritual of ichi scarification has not gone unnoticed by anthropologists. The importance of the Umudioka community in the ichi-cutting profession was noted, for example, by the early ethnographer Northcote Thomas, but of greater significance was the attention drawn by the anthropologically-minded missionary George Basden in his 1921 work *Among the Igbos of Nigeria*. He noted their near monopoly over the practice and suggested that the demand for ichi marks made it a lucrative one. Basden further indicated that Ichi was one of the highly valued practices in society, since “judging by the number of those bearing the ichi marks, it must be a profitable business” (1921: 183).

Later, anthropologist M. D. W. Jeffreys was able to observe variations in ichi patterns characteristic of distinct groups. These include the Ndri and the Agbaja pattern. His 1951 article entitled “The Winged Solar Disk of Ibo Itchi Facial Scarification” really provides a glimpse of the past through the recollections of an elderly man by the name of Nwora from Nibo, in which he recalled how Eze Nri instructed Umudioka to establish patterns of marking for each town and to make sure no one was to be allowed to use the Nri pattern.

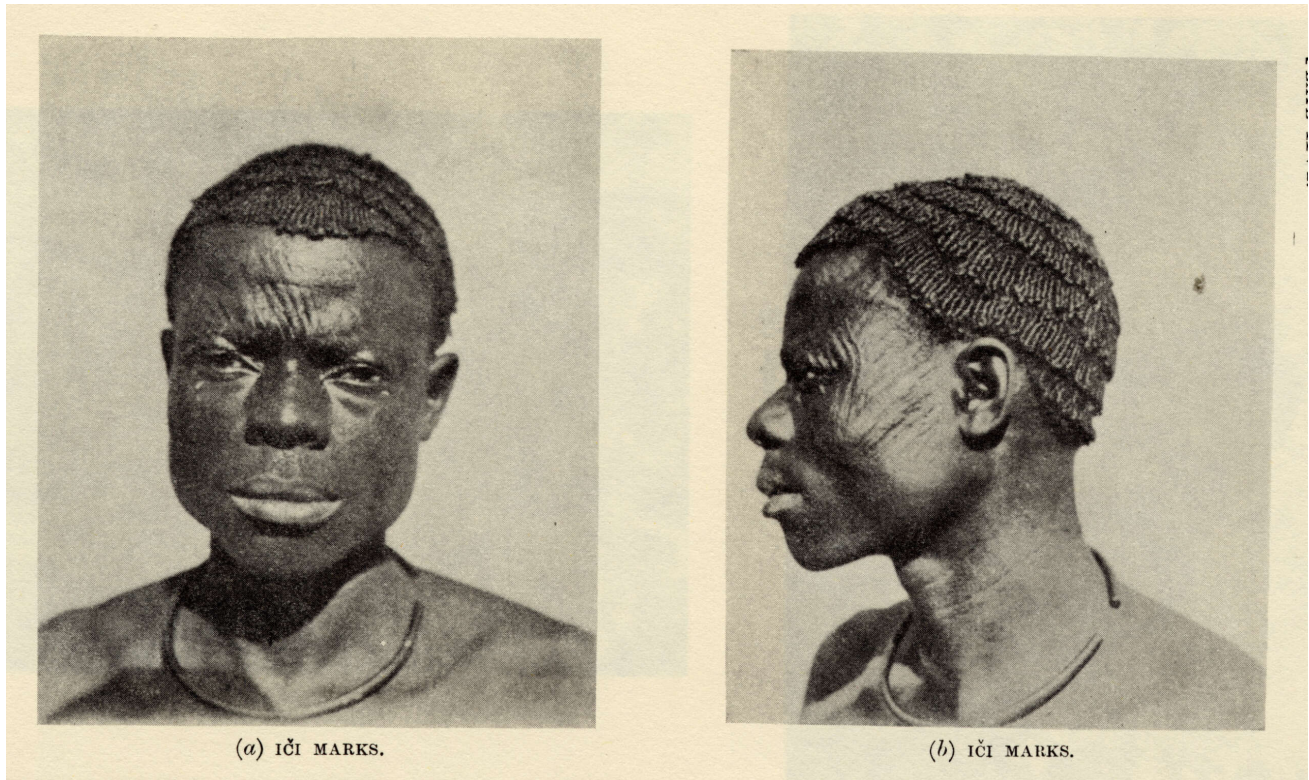
These elaborate designs were not restricted to the faces of human beings but cut across objects in the Igbo cultural environment. Ichi designs graced wooden door panels, ancestral figures, stools, masks, and ritual pottery, depicting rich cultural significance.

The Ndri and the Agbaja pattern. His “The Winged Solar Disk of Ibo Itchi Facial Scarification”, which came out in 1951, poignantly gives a leap into the past as his informant, an elderly man known as Nwora from Nibo, recounted how the Eze Nri instructed that the Umudioka establish patterns of marking different from those of other towns,

forbidding the Nri pattern on any other towns.

However, these complications of patterns are not restricted to human faces alone but extended to other objects in the Igbo cultural landscape. The Ichi designs appearing on wood door panels, ancestral figures, stools, masks, and ritual pottery show the strong resonance these marks have had in culture. Ichi scarification was mainly carried out on men in the Awka-Nri areas, though some women, especially in Awgwu and Nkanu, did receive such marks but less frequently.

Ichi marks not only denoted the status of a man who had passed initial initiation into the highly regarded Nze na Ozo society but gave him an added nobility. In modern times, this tradition echoes back in the word *Ichie* used to refer to members of titled chieftains in the Igbo. Ichi gave the bearer a right to perform ritual washings and to invest titles on others; they were, for that matter, accorded higher respect than those without the markings. Although operating in a society in which yam is taken to be a symbol of masculinity, ichi bearers were not exempted from participating in the production of this staple crop, though some taboos excluded them from participation in certain strenuous labor related to it.



A photo of a man with ichi marks in Northcote W. Thomas's *Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking People of Nigeria* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1913), Plate XVII.

Traditionally, the ichi marks represented the culture of the ancient civilization of Nri, directly related to the sacred powers of the Eze Nri, the Priest-King of Nri. They were empowered to carry out important rituals and maintained the ancestral staff of authority. Songs traditionally accompanying the marking ceremony intertwined concepts of ichi with themes of peace and spiritual royalty. Ichi markings, in turn, existed to the Nri in two different forms: the mgbuzu ichi, wherein there were lines extending from the forehead down through the center of the chin, and the ntuche style involving just a few lines cut across each temple. The ceremonial process can be painful and requires one to remain still and quiet, as it is a very meaningful rite.

These ichi marks gave the men of Nri a well-respected status, thus offering them protection and respect throughout the region in which they could move freely unharmed and were not to be enslaved. Maybe this cultural importance inspired the spread of ichi practices in other parts of Igbo land, where Awgwu and Nkanu developed their own styles that introduced circles and semicircular patterns reproducing

the symbolic meaning of the moon.

Fundamentally, the ichi scarification tradition is a deep-seated testament to the resilience of Igbo culture, an act identifying with identity, nobility, and spiritual heritage all at once. The reinvention of this ancient practice not only preserves a rich legacy but affirms the importance of continuity in an ever-evolving world. From status to protection, to a cultural festival in and of itself, the journey of ichi reflects well the dynamic nature of traditions as they adapt while still deeply rooted in their historical significance.

- Basden, George. Among the Ibos of Nigeria. 1921.
- Jeffreys, M. D. W. "The Winged Solar Disk of Ibo Itchi Facial Scarification." 1951.
- Northcote Thomas. (Early ethnographic studies).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chizobem Chinedu Opiah

Chikwere is a passionate history blogger dedicated towards sharing fascinating stories and untold tales of Igbo history and culture. I am also a Graphic Designer and a Tech enthusiasts. I developed a deep love for Igbo culture and tradition since my teenage age. So far I've learnt alot about Igbo History and Culture and I'll share the knowledge acquired so far in this space of Igbo History and Culture. Daalu.



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